

Resisting 'China Threat': The Philippines, Vietnam and Malaysia in the South China Sea, 1988-2015

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Summary

The South China Sea disputes involve a rising great power, China, whose claim overlap with those of its smaller littoral neighbors – the Philippines, Vietnam and Malaysia. Beijing's claim to over 80% of the South China Sea and its behavior relevant to enforcing that claim have shaped the strategic discourses on threat and national security policymaking in Manila, Hanoi and Kuala Lumpur for decades. The huge power asymmetry in the disputes begs an important question: How do secondary states resist threats from a proximate great power? Existing literature on the security of secondary states provide varying answers - balancing, bandwagoning, and hedging as responses to threats. What this research has found is that balancing, and hedging were the two dominant strategies employed by the three major Southeast Asian claimants against threats to their interests emanating from China. The first determinant that accounts for the choice of these strategies was the degree of the threat at a given period. When threat from China was either low or medium, claimants were more likely to hedge by adopting some forms of bandwagoning and some forms of balancing. When threat reached high-level, claimants were more likely to out rightly resist and balance against it, thereby dropping the bandwagoning side of the strategy and instead employing full balancing to protect a threatened national interest. The four other variables that also influence the range of strategic instruments employed in responding to China threat include external balancing opportunities, availability of regional dialogue institutions and supportive international legal mechanisms, economic growth, and the prevailing leadership attitude towards China, at the time of the threat.